

THE
IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE
RAPTURE
COUNTDOWN TO THE EARTH'S LAST DAYS

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The Rapture

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T h e P r i n c i p a l s

Abdullah (“Smith”/“Smitty”) Ababneh, midtwenties, fighter pilot, Royal Jordanian Air Force, Amman

Nicolae Carpathia, 32, multilingual import/export business tycoon and member of the lower house of Parliament, Bucharest, Romania

Hattie Durham, 26, Pan-Continental Airlines flight attendant, Des Plaines, Illinois

Leon Fortunato, early fifties, Carpathia’s personal and political adviser, Bucharest

Dr. Chaim Rosenzweig, late sixties, Nobel Prize-winning Israeli botanist and statesman, Haifa, Israel

Chloe Steele, 19, freshman, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California

Irene Steele, 39, wife and mother, believer in Christ for eight years, Mt. Prospect, Illinois

Rayford Steele, 41, Pan-Continental Airlines captain, Mt. Prospect

Rayford (Raymie) Steele, Jr., 11, believer in Christ for three years, Mt. Prospect

THE RAPTURE

Jonathan Stonagal, eighties, billionaire American, banker and financier, Manhattan

Cameron (“Buck”) Williams, 29, senior writer for *Global Weekly* magazine, New York City

Viv Ivins, sixties, lifelong friend of Carpathia, Bucharest

PROLOGUE

From *The Regime*

NICOLAE CARPATHIA had morphed into the consummate politician, diplomat, statesman, and international gadfly. He found reasons to travel, establishing alliances with heads of state who would not have thought to grant an audience to someone from the Romanian lower house, except that he was so persuasive. And he had become known as the most popular man in his home country, admired, respected, lauded by even his opponents.

He was a man of peace. A dove. Into disarmament. That tickled the ears of his colleagues in Europe and most of the world. He had not yet visited the United States, but he was certainly known everywhere else. Carpathia's brilliance, business acumen, and accomplishments seemed somehow known by all, without his having to trumpet himself. And the way he deflected praise made people pour it on all the more. The more he got, the more he needed, and often he nearly passed out from

the thrill of it, only to come crashing down on his way from a public appearance.

Nicolae had learned the art of humility. Or at least of appearing humble.

His goal was to bypass the upper house and run for president of Romania when his second term expired. Pundits already called him the favorite. . . .

He wanted to get on with life. It was time to move, to expand, to take what he believed was rightfully his. He had bowed the knee, worshiped his lord and master in exchange for the kingdoms of the world. Was something more required of him? He was the smartest, most well-read, articulate, multilingual man he was aware of.

It was time for Nicolae Carpathia to emerge.

Within the space of a year or so, Rayford Steele realized that his life and career had reached both their zenith and their nadir at once. There was nowhere else for him to go within Pan-Con Airlines, unless it was management. And that held no appeal.

He was flying the flagships of the fleet, had his choice of routes, and virtually set his own schedule. Rayford had mediated the latest skirmish between Irene and Chloe, which resulted in Chloe's dropping out of church altogether. If anything, Irene had grown chillier than ever since then.

Rayford didn't know what her problem was with Chloe. They could not have asked for a more ideal

daughter. She was a gem, a keeper, his friends would say, recipient of a full-ride academic scholarship from Stanford, and while he couldn't imagine her being that far away when it seemed she had been a toddler just a month ago, he was so proud of her he could hardly stand it.

He had the same high hopes for Raymie, but he worried about the kid. Was he becoming a mama's boy? There was nothing soft or sissified about him, except that he was so much into Irene's religion. That couldn't be good. What other boy that age—and especially older—was still enamored with church?

The only interesting thing on Rayford's horizon remained Hattie Durham. She had finally graduated to international flights and occasionally rode on his trips to England and other points east. Her goal was senior flight attendant and enough seniority that she could choose her routes. She had made it clear she would choose his flights, if that was all right with him.

Rayford had made it clear that this was his wish too.

That was ironic, because for as much of a thrill as it had given him to even say such a thing, it represented way more than had ever gone on between them. In point of fact, Rayford had never touched the woman.

He had been solicitous. He hoped his looks and gestures and tone of voice had made their points. But Hattie was the toucher in this relationship. She would lay a hand gently on his shoulder as she slid past him in the bulkhead. Would rest a hand on his back as she delivered coffee to the cockpit. She touched his hand while talking

with him at the occasional dinner or while thanking him for frequent rides home.

Rayford had never been inside her place, and they rarely saw each other alone. But with his life going the way it was and his midlife crisis kicking up alarmingly, Rayford began allowing himself to think of the possibilities. He told himself that if something broke, if he was tapped to fly *Air Force One* or *Two*, or if he was publicly lauded by the CIA or the Defense Department for his clandestine but admittedly limited consulting, that might get him back on track.

He could quit fantasizing about the beautiful young flight attendant and somehow talk himself into robotically walking through his boring married life.

Buck Williams had been with *Global Weekly* nearly four years. He had already written more than thirty cover stories, including three Newsmaker of the Year pieces. He wanted to bag a fourth, so he went to the next staff meeting with his nomination in mind: Dr. Chaim Rosenzweig of Israel, the humble chemical engineer who preferred calling himself a botanist, but who had succeeded in concocting a formula that made the desert bloom like a greenhouse. The result was that the tiny nation of Israel had suddenly become one of the richest in the world.

In the end, the writing assignment went to Buck. He had, after all, done the story when Rosenzweig had won

the Nobel Prize. During their interview in Haifa, Dr. Rosenzweig told Buck of the many suitors who had come calling, trying to curry his favor—and access to his discovery.

“Was *anyone* sincere?” Buck said. “Did anyone impress you?”

“Yes! From the most perplexing and surprising corner of the world—Romania. I do not know if he was sent or came on his own, but I suspect the latter because I believe he is the lowest-ranking official I entertained following the award. That is one of the reasons I wanted to see him. He asked for the audience himself. He did not go through typical political and protocol channels.”

“And he was . . . ?”

“Nicolae Carpathia.”

“Carpathia, like the—?”

“Yes, like the Carpathian Mountains. A melodic name, you must admit. I found him most charming and humble. Not unlike myself!”

“I’ve not heard of him.”

“You will! You will.”

“Because he’s . . .”

“Impressive—that is all I can say.”

Later in the interview Rosenzweig said of Carpathia, “I believe his goal is global disarmament, which we Israelis have come to distrust. But of course he must first bring about disarmament in his own country. This man is about your age, by the way. Blond and blue-eyed, like the original Romanians who came from Rome, before the Mongols affected their race.”

“What did you like so much about him?”

“Let me count,” Rosenzweig said. “He knew my language as well as his own. And he speaks fluent English. Several others also, they tell me. Well educated but also widely self-taught. And I just like him as a person. Very bright. Very honest. Very open.”

“What did he want from you?”

“That is what I liked the best. Because I found him so open and honest, I asked him outright that question. He insisted I call him Nicolae, so I said, ‘Nicolae, what do you want from me?’ Do you know what he said, young man? He said, ‘Dr. Rosenzweig, I seek only your goodwill.’ What could I say? I said, ‘Nicolae, you have it.’ I am a bit of a pacifist myself, you know. Not unrealistically. I did not tell him this. I merely told him he had my goodwill. Which is something you also have.”

“I suspect that is not something you bestow easily.”

“That is why I like you and why you have it. One day you must meet Carpathia. You would like each other. His goals and dreams may never be realized even in his own country, but he is a man of high ideals. If he should emerge, you will hear of him. As you are emerging in your own orbit, he will likely hear of you, or from you; am I right?”

“I hope you are.”

Buck Williams had enjoyed a leisurely late evening meal with Chaim Rosenzweig a mile from the kibbutz and

from the nearby military compound where Buck would stay before his dawn flight back to the States.

Rosenzweig's driver dropped Buck off at the military compound, where he headed through the command center toward his more-than-comfortable quarters. It was already after midnight, and he was fascinated by the alert attention the strategy room personnel gave the glowing computer screens. Earlier in the week he had met the brass and been given full access to the technicians who kept their eyes on the night skies. Many nodded or waved as Buck moved through, and a couple of the command personnel called him by name.

Before undressing for bed he stood by his window and gazed into a starry sky. He felt keyed up, not drowsy. He would have trouble sleeping; he knew it. It was at times like this when he wished he enjoyed wine the way a man like Rosenzweig did. That would have put him out.

Maybe some late reading would do the trick. Just as he was turning from the window to dig a book or magazine from his bag, the raucous blat of sirens shook the place. A fire? Some malfunction? Buck assumed the loudspeakers would advise occupants what to do, where to go. He pulled on his leather jacket and was then drawn back to the window by something new in the skies.

It appeared surface-to-air missiles had been launched. Was Israel under attack? Could it be? Sounds from the air overrode even the ear-rattling sirens. When the skies lit up like noon, Buck knew this was the real thing—a full-fledged air battle. But with whom? And why?

He bolted from his room and ran down the corridor toward the command center. “Stay in your quarters, civilian!” he heard more than once as he darted among ashen-faced men and women in various stages of dress. Many had emerged from their chambers pulling on uniforms and jamming on caps.

The situation room was chaotic already, and this crisis was less than a minute old. Command officers huddled around screens, chirping rapid-fire commands at techies. One man wearing impossibly large earphones shouted, “One of our fighters has identified Russian MiG fighter-bombers.”

From another corner: “ICBMs!”

Buck reeled. Intercontinental ballistic missiles? Against little Israel? From the Russians?

Suddenly no one was sitting. Even the experts stood at their keyboards as if staring at something they didn’t want to see. Every screen seemed lit and jammed with blips and points of light.

“It’s like Pearl Harbor!”

“Like 9/11!”

“We’ll be annihilated!”

“Hundreds of MiGs nearly overhead!”

“Hopelessly outnumbered!”

Then the explosions began. Sections of the building went dark. Some screens. Bombs sounded as if they had landed right outside the windows. So this was no grandstand play designed to bring Israel to her knees. There was no message for the victims. Receiving no explanation for the war machines crossing her borders and

descending upon her, Israel was forced to defend herself, knowing full well that the first volley would bring about her virtual disappearance from the face of the earth.

The sky was lit with orange-and-yellow balls of fire that would do little to slow a Russian offensive for which there could be no defense. It appeared to Buck that every command officer expected to be put out of his misery in seconds when the fusillade reached the ground and covered the nation.

Buck knew the end was near. There was no escape. Some personnel actually left their posts screaming, and their commanders did not try to stop them. Even senior officers dived under equipment and covered their ears.

As the night shone like day and the horrific, deafening explosions continued, the building shook and rattled and rumbled.

The first Israeli missiles had taken out Russian fighters and caused ICBMs to explode too high to cause more than fire damage on the ground. The Russian warplanes slammed to the ground, digging craters and sending burning debris flying. But radar showed the Russians had clearly sent nearly every plane they had, leaving hardly anything in reserve. Thousands of planes swooped down on the tiny country's most populated cities.

Buck's survival instinct was on full throttle. He crouched beneath a console, surprised by the urge to sob. This was not at all what he had expected war to sound like, to look like. He had imagined himself peeking at the action from a safe perch, recording the drama in his mind.

THE RAPTURE

Cameron Williams knew beyond a doubt that he would die, and he wondered why he had never married. Whether there would be remnants of his body for his father or brother to identify. Was there a God? Would death be the end?

O N E

BUCK WILLIAMS realized he would be no more dead outside under the erupting Haifa night skies than he would be inside the command center. This was not bravado; it was the unique, insatiable curiosity of the journalist. He would be the lone casualty at this post who would see and know what killed him. On rubbery legs, he made his way to a door. No one seemed to notice or care to caution him. It was as if they had all been sentenced to death.

He forced open the door against a furnace blast and shielded his eyes from the whiteness of the blaze. The sky was afire. Jets screamed over the din of the inferno, and exploding missiles sent more showers of flame into the air. He stood in stark terror, amazed as the great machines of war plummeted all over the city, crashing and bouncing and rolling and burning. But these all seemed to fall between buildings and in deserted streets and fields.

Buck's face blistered and his body poured sweat. What in the world was happening?

Nicolae Carpathia was a light sleeper, thus the quiet buzz programmed into a tiny device in his headboard woke him immediately at just after one-thirty in the morning.

He sat up, vigorously rubbed his eyes and face, and pressed the intercom button. "Gabriella?"

"Yes, sir. My apologies, but Mr. Fortunato is here and assures me you would want to be awakened."

So it had happened. It was done.

Less than a minute later, Nicolae had dragged a wet comb through his hair and pulled on a luxurious robe. He padded to the elevator, which opened into his parlor and brought him face-to-face with his most trusted adviser.

Carpathia fought to suppress a smile. "Leon, what is it?"

"Israel is being obliterated as we speak."

Nicolae clapped. "The Russians?" he said, as if guessing.

Fortunato nodded, smiling. "There's evidence Libya and Ethiopia are cooperating."

"Perfect. Dr. Rosenzweig knew exactly what I wanted and would not budge. Wonder what he is thinking now. Or whether he will ever think again. Hoarding his formula was a waste. No one could maximize the benefits as I can."

Fortunato grimaced.

“What?” Nicolae said. He pointed to a divan. “Sit, my friend.”

Leon settled heavily onto the couch. “Don’t assume the Kremlin will bring you in on this, Nicolae. My sources tell me this offensive is as costly a single assault as they have ever attempted. The cadre I introduced you to will likely want to license you only a portion of the rights to market in certain areas.”

Nicolae sat across from Leon on a large ottoman. “And you have some illusion that this would be enough for me? Surely you are sporting.”

“I know how you feel, Nicolae; it simply may not be as easy as we’d like. Forgive me, chief, but why do you continue to grin like the Cheshire cat?”

A chuckle escaped Carpathia. “The deal has already been made, Leon.”

“Sorry?”

“You did not hear me or did not understand?”

“The latter, sir.”

“Between Jonathan Stonagal and me, we financed this operation and settled on terms before the first plane left the ground. Russia will have unlimited use of the formula for their entire expanse, as will Ethiopia and Libya, but the marketing of it throughout the rest of the world is under my purview, and they get an appropriate royalty. Seven percent.”

Leon shook his head and leaned back, squinting at Nicolae. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am. I would not make light of billions

of dollars. Would you like the privilege of informing Mr. Stonagal? It is just before seven in New York, and the old man will be on his treadmill.”

Leon sighed. “He’s the one who informed me.”

“But he did not tell you of the arrangement?”

Leon stood, jamming his hands into his pockets. “Neither of you did. My role has been clarified.”

“Oh, make no mistake about that, Leon. You know more than anyone in my orbit, but you do not need to know all—neither shall you ever. You will know what you need to know and when I feel you should know it. Understood?”

“As I said, my role has been clarified.”

Chunks of ice and hailstones as big as golf balls forced Buck to cover his head with his jacket as the earth shook and resounded, throwing him to the ground. Facedown in the freezing shards, he felt rain wash over him. Suddenly the only sound was the fire in the sky, and it began to fade as it drifted lower. After ten minutes of thunderous roaring, the fire dissipated, and scattered balls of flame flickered on the ground. The firelight disappeared as quickly as it had come. Stillness settled over the land.

As clouds of smoke wafted away on a gentle breeze, the night sky reappeared in its blue-blackness and stars shone peacefully as if nothing had gone awry.

Buck turned back to the building, his muddy leather jacket in his fist. The doorknob was still hot, and inside,

military leaders wept and shuddered. The radio was alive with reports from Israeli pilots. They had not been able to get airborne in time to do anything but watch as the entire Russian air offensive seemed to destroy itself.

Miraculously, not one casualty was reported in all of Israel. Otherwise Buck might have believed some mysterious malfunction had caused missile and plane to destroy each other. But as he interviewed the shaken men and women who had monitored the thing on computer screens, they told another story.

A young female Israeli soldier, in heavily accented but precise English, told him, “It was a firestorm, along with rain and hail and an earthquake. That is what saved us from destruction.”

It was the story of a lifetime, and Buck quickly appropriated a jeep and raced throughout the country, interviewing leaders, civilians, soldiers. Dotted the landscape for as far as he drove were hundreds and thousands of chunks of burning, twisted, molten steel that had smashed to the ground in Haifa, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jericho, even Bethlehem—leveling ancient walls but not so much as scratching one living creature.

That was beyond Buck’s comprehension; he simply could not make it compute.

As dawn broke several hours later, special task forces competed with buzzards and vultures for the flesh of the enemy dead, scrambling to bury them before their bones were picked clean and disease threatened the nation.

Buck was greatly relieved to find that Dr. Rosenzweig had escaped unscathed. “Had I not been here and seen it

myself, I would not have believed it,” he told the scientist. “It will take more than I have in me to make my readers buy it either.”

Rosenzweig seemed strangely quiet.

“What is it, Doctor?” Buck said.

“Well, it is just that I feel strange broaching this subject, as an agnostic at best, but would you allow me to introduce you to some scholars who might have an interesting take on this?”

Rosenzweig introduced Buck to university professors who pointed out passages from the Bible that talked about God destroying Israel’s enemies with a firestorm, an earthquake, hail, and rain. Buck was stunned to read Ezekiel 38 and 39 about a great enemy from the north invading Israel with the help of Persia, Libya, and Ethiopia. More stark was that the Scriptures foretold of weapons of war used as fire fuel and enemy soldiers eaten by birds or buried in a common grave.

Buck wasn’t prepared to become religious, he told himself, but he certainly became a different person and a different journalist. Nothing would ever again be beyond his belief.

And if there was one person he wanted to talk to about all this, it was his Chicago colleague Lucinda Washington.